Note by LMB: This e-mail interview was done by Robert Thompson for the website Fantasy Book Critic, in tandem with a review of *The Sharing Knife, Vol. 3: Passage*. The piece first appeared on Wednesday, April 16, 2008.

http://fantasybookcritic.blogspot.com/2008/04/sharing-knife-passage-by-lois-mcmaster.html

Q: Your new book *Passage* is out April 22, 2008 and continues *The Sharing Knife* saga that began in *Beguilement* and *Legacy*, and as I understand it you've already completed book four which is tentatively titled *Horizon* (February 2009). Now are the new books like the first duology which was basically a single story split in half? Also, is it better for new readers if they start with *Beguilement* first or can they just pick up *Passage*; and what is it about Fawn Bluefield, Dag Redwing and their world that you find so enjoyable to write about?

A. Since the second pair of books in the Sharing Knife quartet were intended to be a duology from (nearly) the start (instead of being split apart after the fact), they individually are somewhat more rounded than the first pair. Each volume has plot elements that are set up and resolved within its covers, as well as each being unified by its setting (*Passage* is a river journey, *Horizon* is a road trip.) So they may be read as stand-alones, or at least, the mid-point between the two isn't the sort of cliffhanger to give readers heart failure. But there are larger plot and thematic concerns that spread over both volumes–in fact, all four volumes–that will only be resolved at the end of *Horizon*, when the whole pattern can at last be seen.

If I could draw it here, the *TSK* series structure would look like a row of four little arcs (the volumes) surmounted by two arcs (the two duologies) surmounted by one over-arching arc (the series/tetrology).

There is enough backstory round-up at the start of each volume that they could in a pinch be read as stand-alones (and undoubtedly will be, by some readers), but that's not what the Chef Recommends; pieces of the thematic foundation would be missing from the structure growing in the reader's head.

For those who haven't caught up with the beginning, a sample can still be found here:
http://www.harpercollins.com/books/9780061137587/The_Sharing_Knife_Volume_One/excerpt.aspx

First three chapters of *Beguilement*, free on-line. Why make the poor writer sit there and *tell* you about the book, when you can see it for yourself? Books are meant to be experienced, not described.

TSK began as a project to give myself pleasure in writing again, at a time when I felt very dry, and it held up well for that purpose pretty much from end to end. I was doing several literary experiments at once, including playing with landscapes and social-scapes that were distinctly New World, not recycled European medievaloid. Another quest was to see what would happen if I gave my characters a real grown-up problem to grapple with, one that defied easy, cathartic solutions like cutting off some bad guy's head or toppling the Dark Tower du Jour. "Demographic" is a word that doesn't even exist in Dag's vocabulary, but he sees the shape of the tale's central problem clearly enough. Seeing the solution is as hard for him as it is for us.

But foremost I wanted to see what would happen when I tried to make a romance the central plot of a fantasy novel–and *wow* was that ever a learning experience, not only about what makes a romance story work, but, more unexpectedly, uncovering many of the hidden springs and assumptions that make fantasy work. It turns out to be a much harder blending that I'd thought, going in–after all, I'd had romantic sub-plots in both my fantasy and my SF books before, and wasn't it just a matter of shifting the proportions a bit?

Well, no, it turns out. The two forms have different focal planes. In a romance in the modern genre sense, which may be described as the story of a courtship from first meeting to final commitment, the focus is personal; nothing in the tale (such as the impending end of the world, ferex) can therefore be presented as more important. On a secret level, it's also true; romances are in effect tales about the promulgation of human evolution through sexual selection, a far more fundamental and important long-term activity than any year's, or millennia's, passing politics. (For one thing, it is now theorized by evolutionary biologists that human intelligence is a result of sexual selection.) So romances are at once more personal and more universal than most F&SF plots.

Viewing the reader response to the first two volumes of *TSK*, it has been borne in upon me how intensely political most F&SF plots in fact are. Political and *only* political activity (of which war/military is a huge sub-set) is regarded as "important" enough to make the protagonists interesting to the readers in these genres. The lyrical plot is rare, and attempts to make the tale about something, anything else–artistic endeavor, for instance–are regularly tried by writers, and as regularly die the grim death in the marketplace. (Granted *The Wind in the Willows* or *The Last Unicorn* will live forever, but maginalized as children's fiction.)

I have come to believe that if romances are fantasies of love, and mysteries are fantasies of justice, F&SF are fantasies of political agency. (Of which the stereotypical "male teen power fantasy" is again merely an especially gaudy and visible subset.)

At any rate, the second pair of *TSK* books grapple more directly with the political issues that have been inherent all along in the persons of Dag and Fawn, each representing their own culture in this tale of culture clash. It will be interesting to see if the fantasy readers therefore find their plots more apprehendable. The books as a group are very much about the tensions between the personal and the political, and how the latter depends, so thoroughly that it dares not acknowledge the debt lest it face bankruptcy, upon the former.

Anyway, the courtship tale being a done deal by the end of the second volume, the second duology shifts more to the political plane; I loved the worldbuilding and the characters, and even when I was forced to plunge again into a political plot for the continuation, they carried me along. I look forward with fascination to the reader response from both sides of the genre fence to this second duology, and wonder if it will be as revealing as what I've seen so far.

Q: Currently you're working on a new Vorkosigan novel for Baen Books which I'm sure many readers are excited about. Is there anything you can tell us about this book (*title, projected release date, timeline, returning/new characters*) or any other writing projects that you might be working on or hope to start in the near future?

A: The new Miles book is, as they say, Under Development at present, happily a lot more so today than, say, a month ago, when I was getting very unhelpfully frantic and cranky about it. Pre-writing is starting to happen, scribbling notes to myself and what-not. There isn't a lot more I can say about it at this time, except that as it is getting started about four months later than I'd hoped, with about two months worth of unplanned interruptions still to come, it will also be finished later than originally projected. It will be a book; it will have Miles in it.

The Vorkosigan Companion, a compendium of interviews, articles, and a concordance on the Vorkosiverse (as the readers have dubbed it, since I declined to name it myself) will be upcoming from Baen. I haven't been told the schedule yet, though *Locus* lists it as Dec. 2008. My oldest friend Lillian Stewart Carl is one of the editors, along with the crew at Marty Greenberg's Teknobooks.

Worldcon wants something from me for their program book, preferably a story, which I should have expected but somehow didn't. (They also want a speech.) I haven't written a short story for two decades, so that may be a problem; unless some neurons fire big-time between now and May 1st (which is a problem since I really want all my remaining brain for the Miles book) they're probably going to get an excerpt from the upcoming *The Vorkosigan Companion*. I have at least two more promised e-interviews circling in the queue this month (blog posts for Eos, an interview from my Chinese publisher). I've

done what feels like about three hundred but is probably half a dozen e-interviews this year, and even with cut ‘n pasting I'm not keeping up. More to come, I'm sure.

Q: In speculative fiction there seems to be this great divide between science fiction and fantasy, including the way publishers market books, fan support and so on. Since you've had the pleasure of writing both science fiction and fantasy, what are your thoughts on this divide and what do you feel are the differences between science fiction and fantasy literature?

A. I know some people feel fantasy and science fiction are two different genres, but I think they are more a continuum. A long, branching, and complicated continuum, true. I would say, "If the supernatural is presented as real, it's fantasy," but where does that leave alternate history? SF aims at inducing a sense of wonder in the reader, fantasy at inducing a sense of the numinous; are these really two different things, or only two names for something that's the same at heart? And so on.

For me, the technical aspects of writing–setting up scenes and viewpoints, worldbuilding, characterization, pacing and plotting–are the same for both genres. And, as discussed above, both genres share a peculiar focus on the political as subject matter, although I've tried to wrest my work away from that, in different ways, in both the Chalion and the Sharing Knife books. So while books out on the extreme ends of the F&SF continuum are readily distinguishable, not much in the middle is.

Classification is a problem for theorists. I'm data. My job is not to explain, but simply to be, to the best of my abilities.

Q: Staying on this topic, what is your opinion on the evolution of fantasy and science fiction (*its acceptance in society/entertainment/media, productivity of original ideas, the different formats, changes in publishing, etc.*) since you were first published in the mid-'80s, and where do you see speculative fiction going in the future especially concerning technological advancements (*e-publishing, people playing video games, watching DVDs or surfing on the Internet rather than reading, etc.*)?

A: Certainly there is hotter competition for audience time and attention, on which there is a hard limit of 24/7. There comes a point–for me, rather quickly–where a person simply can't take in any more information, any faster, without a pause to digest it all. I sometimes feel, in this world of information-glut, like a person who has been led

into a giant supermarket and told she must eat all the food on the shelves. It's just not going to happen.

If SF as a literary genre is to be saved (does it need to be?) it will need to be done by the younger writers, I suspect. I do run into odd pockets of anti-genre bias here and there–Britain, I am told, is hostile to the genres. (No, I don't know how this jibes with Harry Potter, Tolkien, etc; this assertion doesn't add up for me, either.) But if there is a falling-off of interest, I haven't seen signs of it yet; what I do see is a loss of market share to individual writers simply because there are so many more of us producing so much more stuff–and the stuff from the past is not only not going away, but being actively recovered and made simultaneously available. The e-book purveyor Fictionwise.com is adding 125 new titles a *week*. So we're hitting that 24/7 limit. In other words, a town that can support two grocery stores can't support three, or five, or five hundred.

But actually, this is a boom time for readers.

I can say, I watch almost no broadcast/cable TV these days; I watch more DVDs, however, mostly anime, science and nature, and travel. This is a result of TV filling up with trash and DVDs becoming more available (through such services as Netflix, which is now shifting to direct downloads, by the way.) It's been pointed out that while movies make their living selling stories to the viewers, TV makes its living selling viewers to advertisers. If the market structure shifts so that we're buying TV-length stories directly again, instead of having our attention being sold to sponsors who have no direct interest in the art, it might help divert, at least in part, that race-to-the-bottom effect that made TV so repulsive. Or not...

Something I hadn't expected was what the development of iPods and MP3 downloads is doing to the audiobooks market, which is, by its modest standards, exploding. Instead of having to wrestle with bulky and expensive physical media, people can just load up whole books, or libraries, into audio format and go. Because access is made easy and choices are so hugely expanded (as Netflix did for me with DVDs), more people are trying more books, and getting into the habit of listening.

I do think all the new media creation tools distributed to mass hands is going to make new art forms possible, plus art coming up through non-traditional channels. On-line comics, self-made videos (no, not *that* kind, though even *that* kind may find itself having to improve quality in order to attract and hold viewers), pixel-based imaging–the top few percent of works from any huge enough base of creative people is bound to be pretty impressive.

Q: Considering how long you've been writing, all the awards (Hugos, Nebulas) that you've accumulated and being a *New York Times*

bestselling author, what still challenges you and what do you still want to accomplish?

A: Well, for one thing, I'm only a NYTimes bestseller by the broad definition–I've been in the top 35 several times, which qualifies one to emblazon it on one's books, but I've not yet hit the Big List, the top 16, the list that gets placed in every bookstore and newspaper in the country. This wouldn't have occurred to me as an ambition except that I've come so close inadvertently–why not those last few steps? It's an award that's given out 64 times a month, how can it be so much harder to gain than an award that's given out once a year? Or so I muse. So that remains an unclimbed mountain for me.

But I think what I want most these days is to gain control of my own time. I've puzzled over what "retirement" means to me when what I'd want to do, if I retired, is stay home and write books, which is pretty much what I do now. I would very much like to retire from having deadlines, however, and from doing excessive PR, although it seems that's incompatible with that NYT hankering. I sometimes wonder about the utility of the effort, though. I mean, J.R.R. Tolkien doesn't go on book tours, or maintain a blog, or blare his opinions all over the Internet, and his books sell just fine. If I hid out and pretended I was dead, would they let me just write? I picture a steady stream of newly-discovered posthumous Bujold manuscripts emanating from a Minnesota attic, or in my case, basement...

Without actually faking a funeral, I think I would like to circle back to my beginnings and write all my books on spec, at my own pace, selling nothing till it's finished. (Except without getting my utilities cut off, or having my checks bounce, or having no health insurance, or all the other un-charms of that long-ago era.) I would be there right now this year, but I made a special exception for publisher Toni Weisskopf at Baen, in light of the two decades we've been working together.

Q: Recently on SF Signal's Mind Meld the following question was asked: "*Two of the most highly regarded fantasy authors–Tolkien and Lewis–were also Christians, whereas the fathers of science fiction were atheists, and SF itself, it could be argued, grew out of Darwinism and other notions of deep time. Is science fiction antithetical to religion?*" The answers to this question can be found HERE, but how would you respond?

A: Given the number of F&SF writers I know who are variously devout, including Quakers, Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews, assorted Protestants, as well as agnostics and atheists (and the same goes for scientists), I'd say no; religion or its absence is a matter of

the writer's world view, and will vary with the writer, not with the genre.

Darwinism isn't necessarily incompatible with religion, either, but it requires a non-childish and perhaps less comfortable form of religion.

Everything is incompatible with the goofier sort of fundamentalism that isn't itself, by self-definition; there's no way any art can respond to that, since such beliefs basically stick their fingers in their ears and cry *La-La-La* to the world. Self-defending with a vengeance.

Q: In closing, last year was tough for writers of speculative fiction. Several authors passed away including Robert Jordan, Madeline L'Engle, Lloyd Alexander, Leigh Eddings, Fred Saberhagen, Jack Williamson, Alice Borchardt, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. while Terry Pratchett was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. And just recently SF legend Arthur C. Clarke passed away. Were you affected by any of this and is there anything you would like to say?

A: It has certainly renewed my consciousness of the value of my own time, and the people in it, and put all careers, including my own, into perspective. Leaves in the wind. All voices fall silent. I suppose it isn't rational to say "But it's too soon!" about writers passing in their 90's, though we do, but finding the increasing number of folks my age or younger in the *Locus* obituary column naturally gives me more pause. (Don't forget John M. Ford in that list.)

It also reminds me that this genre I work in is still new, only one long generation old. I do quite hope I live long enough to see it hijacked by a younger generation and carried off to new life and uses, preferably to a chorus of chorus of "But that's so wrong!" from the superannuated, of which, if I'm lucky and careful, I hope to be one. And if not, well, I've had one heckuva turn already.